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Beith - Letter to Patrick Arkley

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LETTER

TO

PATRICK ARKLEY, ESQ., ADVOCATE,

IN REPLY TO A LETTER

ADDRESSED BY HIM TO

REV. ALEXANDER BEITH, STIRLING,
ONE OF THE SECRETARIES OF THE GAELIC SCHOOL SOCIETY,

ON THE

RECENT DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE OF
THAT SOCIETY.

BY

REV. ALEXANDER BEITH, STIRLING.

EDINBURGH:

W. P. KENNEDY, 15, SOUTH ST. ANDREW STREET.

GLASGOW: D. BRYCE. STIRLING: J. SHEARER. Ayr: D. GUTHRIE.

DUNDEE: W. MIDDLETON. PERTH: J. DEWAR & SON.

ABERDEEN: C. PANTON.

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STIRLING, 3d March 1846.

SIR,

I CANNOT say that I am surprised at the publication of your letter on the late proceedings in the Committee of the Gaelic School Society, and addressed to me as one of the Secretaries. Nor do I mean to complain of the terms in which it is expressed. That letter being written, perhaps it might be as well to leave the whole question to which it refers, as now before the public, to their decision, meaning, specially, by that public, the supporters and friends of the Society. I do not think that the Committee would have any thing to fear by adopting such a course. But I have reason to know that they will follow up their "Minute" by a full statement, in further explanation of their proceedings, assailed by you and your fellow-dissentients. What I now write, you will therefore consider as entirely mine, and as not intended to express the views of any other individual, or of the Committee.

It may be well, in the outset, distinctly to understand what my "principle," as you call it, actually is. It is impossible for me to recall the precise words which I was led to employ on the occasion, but I am pretty sure that the sentiment expressed by me was, that looking to the sinful position in which I believe the Establishment to stand, and the peculiar place which Providence has assigned to us, the Office-bearers of the Free Church, as testifying for the truth, and against the unfaithfulness of the Establishment and its Ministers, I could not, for one, feel myself at liberty, *in present circumstances*, to co-operate with Ministers of that Body in the management of any religious Society. This is the principle which I held, and which I still hold. I may be in a small

minority in holding such a view—perhaps I stand alone. However that may be, I hold it conscientiously, but not in bigotry; for I am prepared to abandon it on the instant that I am convinced of its being opposed to the mind of Christ. This, you will permit me to say, Mr. Goold's oration at the meeting of Directors certainly did not do, and neither has your epistle done it.

Your narrative of the proceedings in the Committee has, as might be expected, the bias of a partizan historian, quite full on your own side, but meagre enough on the other. While it is not my intention to enter into a full vindication of the Committee's proceedings, or to discuss at great length the important general questions which may be raised on these proceedings, I may say, in supplement of your statement, that neither I nor my friends were the party to moot the question of the admission of Ministers of the Establishment into the Committee. I may state further, that having no knowledge of what was done last year in the same matter, which is true also of Mr. Elder, I deeply deplored it, and lamented the evil which I foresaw must follow, whatever might be decided; and, moreover, that when the question was raised, I contemplated nothing else than the rejection by our Committee of the views which I held—the adoption of your list—and my consequent retirement, as well as that of others, from the management. It was as much matter of surprise as of thankfulness, that, in the good Providence of God, whilst the members of Committee did not adopt my “principle,” but with a very few exceptions kept themselves entirely free on that head, they did, notwithstanding, come to a conclusion, by which the Society, as I believe, will be preserved; and as I trust, notwithstanding the present distractions, in the end be extended and invigorated beyond all our calculations. Perhaps you might have stated in your narrative that, after Mr. Goold had delivered himself, so much to *your* satisfaction, obviously, I replied or explained, to the effect that I did not expect the Committee to adopt the “principle” on which I was compelled to act, but thought it honest and candid to show them that they had to decide the

question of the lists with the fact before them, that I did hold such a "principle" in common with several of my brethren—all the Secretaries, at least—the whole body of the Teachers, and the Superintendent. You might have stated, too, that both Mr. Paul, of the Commercial Bank, and Mr. M'Dougall, whose authority ought to have had weight with you and your friends, assured you that, if the principle for which you contended were adopted, you might have the pleasure of being a Committee in Edinburgh to defend "Catholicity," but you could be no Committee having the duties of the Gaelic School Society to discharge. It was, doubtless, in favour of your *case* to omit all reference to the remarks of these gentlemen, and of the others on the same side who maintained unanswerably, that a regard to the best interests, and even the continued existence of the Society, demanded the exclusion, for the present, of Ministers of the Establishment from the Committee. It was mainly this consideration, as you know, and as you cannot deny, which decided the vote. You and your friends gave your voices for the principle of "Catholicity," as being that of the Society, and then, as you held, about to be abjured should my list be adopted. The friends on our side of the house gave theirs, as violating no principle of "Catholicity,"—this being distinctly maintained by them—but as doing what, under circumstances, the interests of the Society, and of religion connected with it, required at their hands. To shew that they did violate any principle of "Catholicity" by this vote—the charge brought against them—you ought to have proved that the rules of the Society require an intermixture of the names of all denominations in its management. But this you do not attempt; for you know there is no such regulation.

The charge, therefore, which, the religious public will see, lies against you is, that for the sake of your idolized "Catholicity," you did put in jeopardy the existence of a Society which has been more honoured of God than any other of its day;—and that, rather than not tread under foot the prejudice and bigotry of myself and others (if you please so to call it,) you

were prepared to put an end to the work of God in the Highlands, through the instrumentality of the Gaelic Schools. The majority were as good *Catholics* as you ; but they loved the Society and its usefulness too well to follow you in such a course. The Society was too valuable a gift to be offered at the shrine of your idol. It may be a small matter, in your eyes, and in those of your friends, to have so acted, or it may be, at any rate, a matter of inferior importance to the momentous duty of recognizing the present Establishment of Scotland as one of the "*Evangelical*" Churches of Christendom. But there is an authority that will pronounce a very different judgment on your proceeding ; and, notwithstanding your sneer at my worthy friend Mr. Noble, you and your friends would do well to recall some of the "home thrusts" which he was enabled to give on the occasion referred to.

You deny that the breaking up of the Society would have followed the adoption of your list, and you quote Mr. Hutchison as an authority ; but you had the authority and assurance of those far more competent to judge, and less biassed in their judgment, on the other side, honestly and urgently stated. But, for the sake of the "Catholicity" of the Society—that is, doing honour to the present Scottish Ecclesiastical Establishment, you overbore it all in your minds. You created a difficulty, and imagined a danger, which did not exist, as to the said "Catholicity," and for the sake of it, you put in jeopardy that which is at this moment, and has been so long, an instrument of so much good in the Highlands of Scotland.

I am bound, of course, to express many acknowledgments both to you and Mr. Goold, with Mr. Johnston, for your labour and zeal to enlighten me on the subject of "*bigotry*," and on the most disastrous position in which I place myself by being its victim. Your benevolent intentions deserve my best thanks, and, with sincerity equal to that which attaches to your intentions and efforts, I beg gratefully to tender them. But am I a bigot ?

"Bigot," says Dr. Johnson, is "a man devoted un-

reasonably to a certain party, or to certain opinions." Now I am devoted to a certain party, and to certain opinions, but am I so unreasonably? I am devoted to the Free Church as a Church of Christ, and as the Church of Scotland—I am devoted to the opinion that the present Establishment is not the Church of Scotland, either *de jure* or *de facto*. But am I so, unreasonably—that is, without reasons of sufficient weight and number? Whatever other men may think, I think not so. On the contrary, unanswerable reasons have been given for such an opinion; or, if you and your friends think otherwise, you will at least acknowledge that they are *unanswered*. I need not tell you where they are expressed; you have read the PROTEST laid on the table of the General Assembly on 18th May 1843. Is there anything equivocal there? Any hiding of the views entertained by those who abandoned the Establishment to preserve the Church? Has that document been answered? Have the party who now enjoy the emoluments and temporal privileges of the Establishment, shown that they have not, for the sake of them, relinquished all that constituted the distinctive glory of the Church of Scotland?—that they have not sold for money—for that is virtually the meaning of it—the great doctrine of the Headship of Christ over his Church, as well as of the liberty of the Christian people under Him, as the only authority in his own house? Have they ever shown that they are not subjected to civil control in spiritual things?—in the exercise of every spiritual function essential to the existence and prosperity of a Church of Christ? Are they not exhibited to the world as being so subject, in point of fact, by all the proceedings of their ecclesiastical judicatories? If it be so, did I say anything wrong in asserting that the Ministers of that Establishment are ecclesiastically under scandal? and that, if connected with our Church, we should be compelled—except they abandoned their unfaithfulness in all this, and repented of it—to depose them? Was I wrong in asserting that to this we had already, as a Church, committed ourselves by deposing one minister who had threatened to call in the civil power in a case of

discipline in which he was a party? You would have me, however, agree to conduct the affairs of a strictly religious society, with men whom I hold to be under such scandal; for that society, you say, is not the Church! I stated in the Committee, as you are aware, that, apart from the objection against such parties as under scandal, I could not but expect that they would introduce their principles and morality into the management of the Society if admitted, and therefore that it was impossible we could go on together; besides, that if I agreed to their admission, I could not see how I could justify my breaking up the Establishment, or my not remaining there and co-operating in *that Society* with the men in question. That you should be anxious to have them recognized by the Free Church as if under no imputation, cannot be wondered at; and, therefore, the efforts at present being made in this direction everywhere are natural; but you must see that what they gain by this we lose.

But the Establishment, according to Mr. Johnston, is the same now that it was six years ago; or, as you express it more than once—but which, to do Mr. Johnston justice, I cannot recollect to have been so explicitly stated by him—that there “has been no change in the principles and constitution of the Church of Scotland during the last six years.” If so; if the Establishment was before the Disruption what it is now, the more shame to Mr. Johnston to have had intercourse with it; if it has been always what it is now, how blind all the good men that were so long to be found in it, how blind the fathers of the Secession, of whom Mr. Johnston is a respected successor! But if it be so, perhaps Mr. Johnston will help you, and the needy friends in the Establishment, to answer the PROTEST, which stares you night and day in the face as the remembrancer of your unfaithfulness, and the forewarner of an overthrow which must surely come. Or, if he say that the PROTEST expresses the view which he always held of the character of the Establishment, and its position with respect to the State, then he may be so kind as answer the CLAIM OF RIGHT, and show that the pretensions

therein set forth are chimerical—that the Establishment never had what it pretends it had, and what we assert an illegal and unconstitutional explanation and application of the law of patronage has deprived it of. This would be doing good service to your body. And perhaps Mr. Goold will favour them, too, by exposing the Protest in its Erastian character, and, besides, help the Free Church to a better understanding of truth, and a greater degree of faithfulness. If I know my own mind, and any thing of that of my brethren, we desire nothing more than to be led into all truth, that we may hold it fast and *not sell it*, be the suffering connected with this, or the shame, what it may. Mr. Goold sees very clearly where my “principle” must lead me. I see just as clearly where his must lead him and his friends; and, perhaps, the sooner they act it out, the better for the religion of Scotland.

It is no trifling question that has been raised. I believe that the honour of our Great Head is more concerned in it than many think. It was no light thing for us to take up the position which we now hold through our PROTEST, with the subsequent proceedings, and the CLAIM laid before Parliament. We live in agitating times. There lies a charge against the Establishment, of fearful sin committed by their submitting to the State in its assumptions in spiritual matters in this land—there lies a charge against the Nation, acting by its courts of law and legislature, for making such encroachments as they did, and doing public dishonour to the great truths of Christ's supremacy over the Church, and the liberty of his living members. Both are unanswered! Whether in this generation, or a future, answers will be demanded with a voice of thunder. In the meantime, our country, I believe, is on its trial. There is the party who preferred temporal advantages to the great truths referred to—there is the party who renounced them for the sake of those truths. This is the great prominent fact of the times—deny it who will. It is impossible that there can be coalescence between the antagonist parties without sin, if there be value, virtue, and vitality in

the truths—and, therefore, men must choose between them! It will not do to say, “I see no difference between the Establishment now, and six years ago;” or, “The Protest is thoroughly Erastian.” These are poor subterfuges, when such a fact stands out in bold relief, and when the question comes to be, as to choosing between the parties. That the Free Church is not perfect—that we have not attained, is most sure—but that we have been faithful to the light which we have received, who will impugn—or that we sincerely desire more light—all light, needful for the discovery of the will of God? Can the same be said of the Establishment, especially of those whom you are not ashamed to call *Evangelical*? The Free Church does stand on ground peculiarly her own, in God’s sovereign providence. Wo to us, if through the terror of losing the countenance of other denominations, we be moved from it, and driven into co-operation, in present circumstances, with the Establishment. We cannot go to them on such terms—but how cheerfully—with what a Catholic spirit can we receive every true friend of Christ among them, who will come to us. We dare not act, so as to neutralize our position, or diminish its importance; and if dissenting friends cast us off for that, and resolve to own, cherish, and co-operate, with those who lie under the unanswered charges, let them do it. To their own master they stand or fall. But will they do it? I believe, if we abide faithful, that God will prevent it.

You would shut me up to the conclusion, that I must hold there is no Christian minister in the Establishment. I repudiate the sentiment. There are those there with whom I took counsel in times past, and of whom I dare not yet abandon the hope, that they are what I once believed them to be, though in an evil hour, they failed to maintain, by the sacrifice of all temporal things, the solemn and essential truths to which they before gave such unequivocal and irrevocable testimony. There being such persons in the Establishment, is one of my reasons for my present conduct. I dare not be unfaithful to them. I dare not do that which might prove a panacea to their troubled consciences. On the contrary, I am

bound to declare to them, my deep and painful conviction of their exceedingly dangerous situation, and to testify, in whatever way God, in his providence, may give me opportunity, against their public sin—a sin so dishonouring to Christ—so injurious to the name of Christian—and detrimental to the progress of his cause. Who knows what may follow faithfulness on the part of myself and friends, towards those unhappy men—whether Ministers or others—connected with the Establishment. Still the cry is in their ears, “Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.” I judge no man, but whatever others do, I dare not be guilty of so dealing by the adherents of the Establishment, as to lead them to think, that I have any opinion of their position before the world, than that of its being one of deep guilt.

As to the proceedings of the Committee of the Gaelic School Society towards me, personally, which you say are, by report, intended, I am entirely at my ease. If sacrificing me will appease you, or others, most cheerfully shall I be the victim. I took the office of Secretary, because of the illness of my beloved relative Mr Elder, desirous to carry on the business in his room. I did so, too, because, after a residence of twenty years, as minister in various parts of the Western and Northern Highlands, and after long acquaintance with the Society, I did think myself qualified to be of use—and felt that I should not shrink from assuming, with my other duties, heavy enough already, for a time at least, part of the task of the Secretaries of this Society. But I am at the pleasure of the Directors and of the Society—if they see cause to “*throw me overboard*”—although from letters in my possession, I know it would be a disappointment to many, if I did, at least at present, retire. For your comfort, however, I assure you such a proceeding will not drown me.

And now, I trust I may, without offence, entreat you to consider where you stand in this matter before God. You are the champion of the Scottish Establishment—of that ecclesiastical body which has submitted to civil control in spiritual things, and which has sold the blood-bought rights of

the Christian people of Scotland—a charge, as you know, capable of proof. You think that a small matter. You think it no crime to allow Cæsar to get possession of the things of God—no crime to allow the people of Christ to be placed at the mercy of patrons and the Civil Courts for pastors, who are bound to break to them the bread of life. You are a lawyer, and the blinding effect of that has, alas! in too many instances, been seen among us. How distinguished and honourable are the exceptions! But I am told that you are not without feelings betokening tenderness of heart. Might I not ask you to “*reconsider*” *your* position! The time is at hand when we shall both give account to God. I do not flatter you by saying, or doing aught to imply it, that you may be a very good Christian, as you are. But rather, I tell you honestly, that I believe you are guilty of most alarming sin by remaining in the Establishment, and trying to defend it. It may be sin in ignorance—I trust and believe that it is; still it is sin, which will assume a very different character, if, after being warned, you do not search and see, and put it away from you.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Very faithfully yours,

ALEX. BEITH.

PATRICK ARKLEY, Esq. Advocate.

P.S.—If we are to be forced into a co-operation with Ministers of the Establishment, there is a course which consistency will compel us to adopt, and should we agree to enter on it, I for my own part shall feel fewer objections to such compulsory co-operation. I mean that of direct and active efforts, by every constitutional means, to have the Establishment put on the same footing with every other denomination of

Christians in Scotland. It is not worthy of a body that pretends to be the "Church of Scotland," to abide a *pauper* Church amidst the light of the present time, and its changed position would then test its true character. The insufficiency of the Voluntary principle to provide for the spiritual wants of the country, was at one time a powerful argument for endowments. We have lived to see that argument practically refuted, so that no one could be bold enough now to maintain it. The Free Church is a demonstration that there is a treasury in the principle and affections of the Christian people, far richer than that of the Exchequer of any nation, from which may be derived enough and to spare of all temporal provision for the support of the ministry.* We have lived to learn also that the doctrine of Christ's Headship over the nations, and of the duty of the State, therefore, towards his Church, does not necessarily imply the duty of giving endowments. Nay, we have lived to see how the proper duty of the Nation may become, and has become, the withdrawal of endowments from the section of professed Christians who have them in possession. I should have preferred the course of allowing the Establishment to sink, through its own weakness and glaring unworthiness, if it did not repent and return to the right path. I desired nothing more than to be permitted to let it alone, assured that such facts as that the stipends of whole counties are paid away to men who have literally no flocks, and are themselves not entitled, in any sense, to the name of Shepherds, must soon produce their proper results. But if I am not to be permitted to conduct myself in this way, then let the other alternative be the line of procedure, and that without any delay. If the Establishment be a "Church of Christ," the Free Church knows from happy experience, and your friends in this conflict will assure you of it too, it

* Perhaps it is your feeling the power of this demonstration that has suggested to your mind that the Free Church might become a "*valuable* supplement" to the Establishment. "Hundreds of thousands," instead of "tens," would be "*valuable*"—and so would life infused into that which is dead.

will lose nothing by giving back to Cæsar the things that are his—and casting itself on Him whom it professes to serve. So far from sustaining loss, it will thus secure unspeakable gain, and for proof I appeal to the respective contributions of the Free and Established Churches to all religious objects ! I add further, only, that it may serve a great end if the present discussion lead to such a result ; if, through God's blessing, it lead to making the Establishment *Free*, and worthy of being co-operated with by all other Churches. It is no small thing for it, to have so many patterns to copy from.

A. B.

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